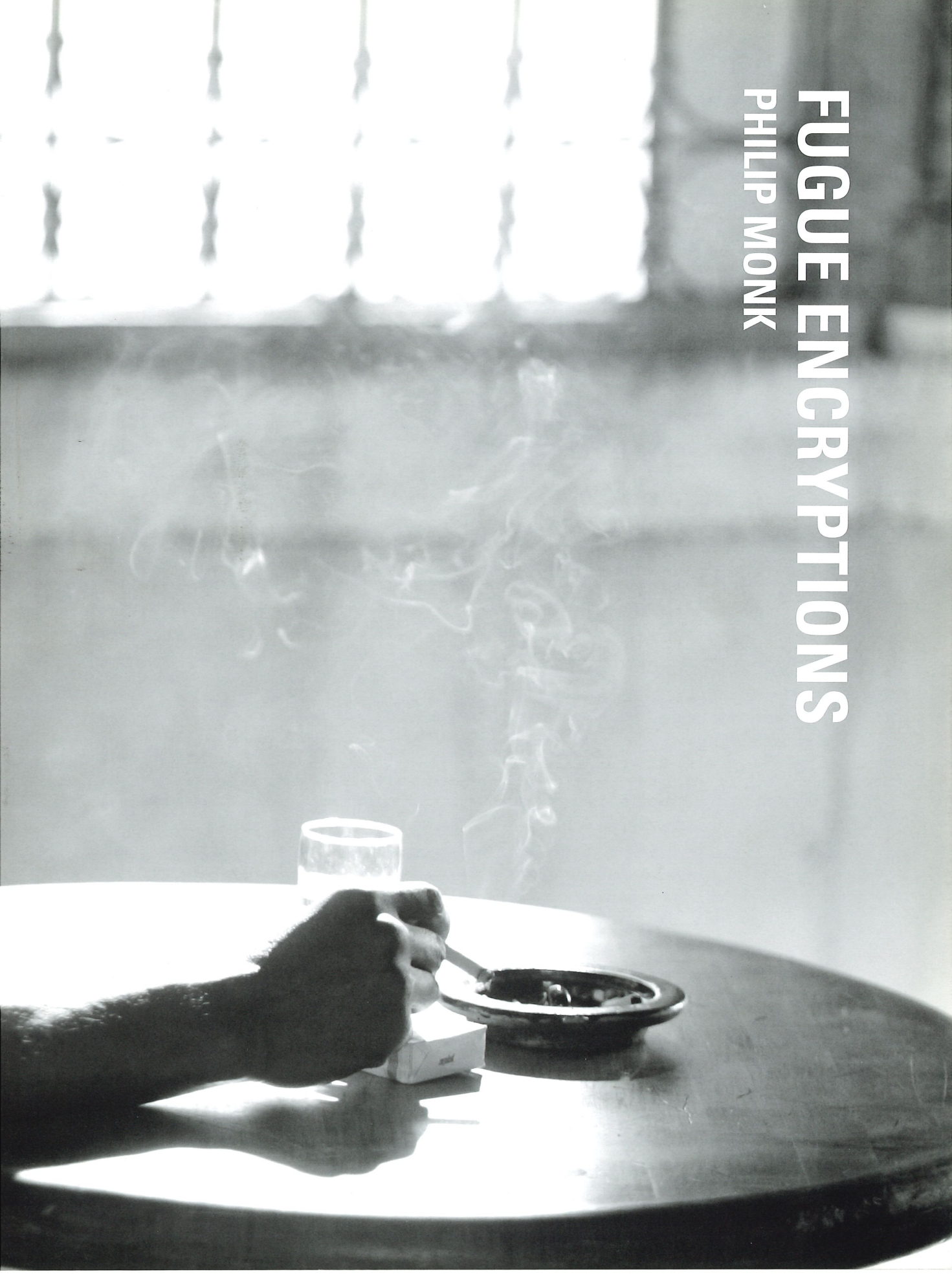


FUGUE ENCRYPTIONS

PHILIP MONK





Journey into Fear, 2001

That Stan Douglas' film and video projections are complex mechanisms, we know. Yet, how they function as the closed system of a machine is not the same as how they are constructed. The process of their making connects them to other series that exist in the world, whether these are actual conditions, media relations, or fictional representations, which the completed machine, in the end, stands to and acts on. These are the work's sources and references. Any work of art, however, cannot be reduced to either as the place where meaning resides—if we believe that "meaning" resides anywhere except in and through the work's mechanics.

To characterize an artwork as a machine perhaps counters our expectations of artistic intention and performance; just as we think an artwork's reliance on another artwork automatically discounts its status as original. Yet, Douglas has achieved something unprecedented in a remarkable body of work that continues with *Inconsolable Memories* (2005), precisely and consistently through such strategies that seem to absolve themselves from authorial intention. These strategies, technics rather than expression, produce a new work fabricated from a narratological analysis of a given text. The original ghosts through a rewriting relayed not only by means of another configuration of images and texts, but regulated in performance by the permuting bias of the work's projection apparatus.

The set of projections Douglas calls recombinant narratives—*Journey into Fear* (2001) and *Suspiria* (2003)—have already provided brilliant examples of this bias in operation. These works are complex constellations of pro-filmic sources and references that are linked in serial chains that the mechanics of the work engages, but does not necessarily display. *Inconsolable Memories* is seemingly simpler in that it takes "only" one text as its source, basing itself on Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's 1968 Cuban film, *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment).

In Alea's film, Sergio, an alienated, bourgeois anti-hero, a Third World Marcello Mastroianni, a rentier with intellectual ambitions, decides, when his parents, wife, and friends

emigrate to Miami after the American embargo and the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, to stay in Havana—not in solidarity with the Revolution, but thankful, nonetheless, for its revenge on a class he despises. He writes, he wanders, and he ponders the underdevelopment of Third World colonial cultures and individuals. He observes and judges. He fantasizes, remembers his past, seeks female pleasure, and has an affair that draws him into court accused of rape. He loses his properties to the Revolution with small compensation but needs not work. Finally, completely alienated like an Antonioni character from everything and everyone around him, he falls apart under the pressure of the 1962 October missile crisis, existentially alone. We identify with his point of view that has guided us through the film, assisted by his voice-overs that are likely the diary entries in the novel on which the film is based.

Douglas updates the film's setting from post-Bay of Pigs to the Mariel expulsions of 1980 and exploits the original film's flashback structure for his narrative reconstruction. As in the original, Douglas combines documentary and fictional footage, substituting media coverage of the Mariel Boat Lift episode for that of post-revolutionary Cuba and adapts dialogue from the film and novel to the new footage (shot on a sound stage in Vancouver with rear-projection images of Havana). His Sergio is a black architect who has been imprisoned since 1976 when, a year after his wife Laura and friend Pablo left for Miami, he received unspecified contraband. Offered release if he joins the Mariel exodus, Sergio opts to remain in Havana, escaping and dangerously haunting his old confiscated apartment, which has been given to Elena, a government analyst of American media broadcasts (and Sergio's lover of Alea's film). At least this is the plot that we piece together from Douglas' film, which is interrupted by the repetition of a set of scenes that reconfigure the narrative as it continues to evolve, but that also confuse its time-lines. (The seamless mixing of scenes—real time montage—is the product of a double film projection of two unequal film loops, one in three parts and the other five. The repeated scenes from the three-part loop, thus, continually alter time-lines depending on the particular sequence they interrupt. Periodically, images from one and soundtrack from the other loop overlap.)

To describe the connection between *Memories of Underdevelopment* and *Inconsolable Memories* as being one of content, as I just did here, is banal. Neither homage nor parody, *Inconsolable Memories* also exhibits none of the unthinking paucity of the Hollywood remake. Nor, on the contrary, does it position itself solely through the analytical distance of a critique. The reworking of content is a consequence of the reworking of the means of presentation. This combined analysis plays on the "spectator-spectacle relationship" of the original.¹ *Inconsolable Memories* makes itself, in part, from the cues present in the host work, which itself is a complex realization of linkages between images and texts—"inside" and "outside" the work. That we have two works in dialogue in *Inconsolable Memories*, one surfacing through the other, both being associations of image and text, which, moreover, are temporal constructions, means that we have a very complicated situation. Nonetheless, the new work has all the

clarity and simplicity of a mechanical apparatus, although it does not immediately offer this appearance. Because they are actually structural reflections of each other, rather than existing within a representational framework separable as content and form, narratological analysis and permuting performance mesh together as the functioning of a machine. Recombinant narrative *machines* would be the proper description of Douglas' recent works. The relation between *Inconsolable Memories* and *Memories of Underdevelopment*, then, is a productive alliance rather than a derivative filiation.

Before it functions, a machine has to be designed and engineered. Analysis takes place before performance, even though in Douglas' recombinant narratives, performance is also analysis in action.

The discrepancy of titles provides an angle of analysis since Douglas replays the first world reception of the film—however now critically—when he uses the title of the English translation of Edmundo Desnoes' novel *Memorias del subdesarrollo* for his own work. Desnoes' novel was the basis of the screenplay co-written with Alea, but the translation was also a novelization of the film, since it added film scenes absent from the original Spanish text.² (Already, this confuses the correspondences between film, script, and novel, taken up again by Douglas who lifts dialogue from both film and novel, but then, as does any script, redistributes scenes and lines.) The translation's title change denies the considerable ironies to which "underdevelopment" was put in the book and reiterated in the film. *Playboy's* complaint that the film title was a "turn-off" is proof that the reviewer similarly had misunderstood the strategies of the film and had stopped at the first image relationship offered by the film-maker, thus avoiding the work proposed by the film, which is given solely through formal constructions intrinsic to it.³ Alea and Douglas pursue analogous strategies to complicate and implicate our viewing, although the contradictions they accept as part of this process have different purposes.

The English title of Desnoes' novel derives from a phrase spoken by Emmanuelle Riva in Alain Resnais' film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*—"J'ai desire avoir une inconsolable mémoire." A theatrical release contemporary to the story, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, is a film that the narrator of the novel, Sergio, decided to see twice. The phrase is also quoted twice in Desnoes' book, separated by pages of text, as a European counter-example to the problem, as Sergio sees it, of character underdevelopment in the Third World. It does not reappear in the film (although a poster for the film does); nonetheless, repetition is the structure of Alea's film, a repetition that is put to dialectical use. The film's title is ironic: while recognizing underdevelopment in others, Sergio cannot see it in himself. Depending on our class status, we potentially repeat this mis-recognition; on first viewing, the first world spectator may not comprehend the actual relations of images and texts, of sights and sounds, that the film-maker constructs—as we are guided by our identification with Sergio's interpretations of what he sees, by his point of view

and voice-over: hence, my limited plot description above. As a bourgeois intellectual of left-leaning persuasion, I probably identify with Sergio, although I might not go so far as to see the film, as some European and North American critics first did, only as a critique of the plight of the individual artist under bureaucratic socialism. Actually, Sergio's point of view is only one in the film.

Radicalizing what is implicit in Desnoes, Alea uses film relationships themselves to force the spectator to deviate from the path Sergio takes. While we initially may share Sergio's point of view and the judgements he proffers on what he sees around him, by the end of the film we critically detach ourselves from his viewpoint and judge his inability to join the new society, which we begin to see in a very different light. In his reworking of the plot, Douglas adapts two of the critical devices or strategies Alea employs. One is the filmic representation of memory (the mechanisms of montage that allow for our reading of temporal shifts); the other is the subtle, systematic examination of viewpoint and corresponding demonstration of "levels of approximation to reality"⁴ that take into account the fictional and documentary formats of Alea's film. The first seems integral to Alea's story on its level of content; the second pertains to the film's formal construction but is no less relevant to the story the film, rather than Sergio, tells.

The first device plays upon the two-fold structure of memory: recall and involuntary memory. After the departures of the first part of the film, recall is, on the one hand, Sergio's justification of his troubled relationships, and, on the other, a means of plot condensation. But during his flâneur-like wanderings through Havana, Sergio involuntarily remembers his distant past, and those individuals associated with certain sites in the city, but only under the conditions of those buildings having been repurposed by Castro's government: a religious school becoming the Lenin Special School, for example. Both recall and reminiscence reflect changes in the protagonist's life. The first is consequential on interpersonal ruptures, that is, on what seems most immediate; the second, however, is only triggered by the recognition of an objectively transformed social situation, although Sergio does not necessarily see it this way—from the social institutions of individual and class privilege to those of collectivity. Ironically, the further back the subjectively suffused memory and the remembrance of things past, the more objective the conditions of its stimulus. Thus, with no editorializing or socialist realist harangue, but purely through the point of view of the protagonist, Alea has shifted our viewing of images from a subjective to an objective basis.⁵

Perhaps it is only because of the familiarity of the original film, but *Inconsolable's* three-part loop that provides the background to the new story—Sergio's detached leave-taking of Laura and Pablo in 1975 and his subsequent arrest in 1976, all of which vary only slightly from Alea's film—similarly offers us Sergio's original assurance of objective relations that we find lacking in the five-part loop. In the three-part loop, we are given the rupture of the relationships and its consequences within linear temporal sequences. The episodes in the five-part loop, which generally reflect Sergio's 1980 viewpoint, do not follow a spatio-temporal

logic; we cannot tell if scenes are flashbacks or flash-forwards or whether the order is shuffled by another operational logic. Nor are the reminiscences within this loop set-off by in-frame situations.⁶ As a whole, these episodes reflect the desultory character of Sergio's wanderings and the bedeviled erotic engagements of *Memories of Underdevelopment*, but the original idleness has now been supplanted by the diffuse threat of rearrest.

Yet, these attempts at determining the objective or subjective status of images of the past are not as clear-cut as the delineation of the separate storylines of the two loops suggests because, of course, the two loops mesh their sequences. With five story segments on one loop and three on the other, fifteen permutations of the storyline are possible. Any scene of the five-part loop is followed or preceded by three variations of the other loop whose linear sequences are thus mixed within the subjectivities of the other. The ambivalence we sense here is not just Sergio's carried over from Alea's film: it is something we derive from the disjointed time-lines of the projections. Ambivalence is put into play by the mechanism of projection where it is now an *objective* feature of the bias of the machine. Is this an objectivity that we are brought to as the work's viewers, as in Alea's dialectical procedures, or does the machine solely determine objectivity since, in order for the machine to function, for it to permute, each segment operationally must be equivalent to any other?

Douglas' narrative permutations further radicalize Alea's procedures, but perhaps necessarily apply them to a different end. In *Memories of Underdevelopment*, "the multilateral perception of the object [was] the film's structural principle." Thus, we are led progressively from an ambivalent identification with Sergio to a critical attitude that should end, according to the film-maker, with a "choosing of sides."⁷ Do we come to a comparable critical attitude in *Inconsolable Memories*, or has the machine, working with quantifiable equivalencies, co-opted our choice? Under the conditions of capitalism in which Douglas operates as an artist, can cinema be engaged? Indeed, can sides still be chosen in 2005, as they seemingly were by Sergio in 1980? Yet, what has *Inconsolable's* Sergio chosen in remaining in Cuba? Perhaps we should ask instead, has "Sergio" learnt anything, even with the overturning of race and class relations through the Cuban Revolution, between 1962 and 1980?

Do we expect the new Sergio to learn when the old Sergio failed? Before we answer questions about the ability of Sergio to comprehend the situation within which Douglas, following Alea, confines him (which, we insistently note in both cases, is not a matter of plot but a confinement within evolving image-sound constructions), we have to ask about the effects of *Inconsolable's* machine. This is neither a technical question leading to a description: this is a montage-machine that continually realigns segments to one another; nor is it a question of the effects of permutation on plot: this is an editing machine that temporally reconstructs the plot, reconstructing the time-lines of the narrative in the process. If the film-maker, Alea, admits manipulation of the spectator-spectacle relationship in order to provoke

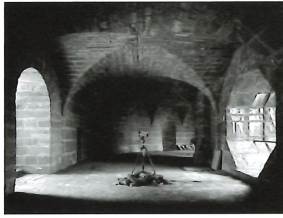
the viewer's critical response, what are the consequences of a machine manipulation on our viewing? Do we expect to learn in the same way as Alea's socialist spectators, who might have been slow to divest themselves of the dominant bourgeois ideology supplanted by the Revolution, to which film lends its tools of persuasion?⁸

Alea organizes his elements dialectically to transform spectatorship—either by inflecting repeated situations to reveal the subjectivity of the protagonist's point of view, or by varying conditions of reception of documentary constructions to show their (authorial) manipulations of evidentiary objectivity. In *Inconsolable Memories*, the machine "arbitrarily" performs these functions by automatically connecting sequences. I say arbitrarily, because how can we know what critical contexts are established by these juxtapositions that produce variable plot relations? Viewpoint is continually permuted. This would seem to condemn Sergio to a perpetual fugue state where he would be fully alienated from his own subjectivity, a condition, however, that would serve the plot.⁹ Sergio would be stripped even of his involuntary memory. There are no accidental encounters in the triggering of the machine. The machine objectifies memory by making flashbacks equivalent to any other episode; in fact, any segment could be real time narrative, a flashback or flash-forward, no matter what its context of sequencing. As spectators, are we, too, condemned to be appendages of this machine, mere functionaries and not dialectical participants? This would be the case unless permutation prepares these contrasting contexts for us.

The principle of the machine is repetition; the principle of permutation is variation. *Inconsolable Memories* repeats identical scenes with variable soundtracks (or, equally, repeats soundtracks with variable images) when periodically the image from one projection and sound from the other overlap.¹⁰ Interpretations permute depending on the variation. For instance, when *Llegue Llegue* plays as the background musical track to Sergio's escape from Mariel, this transparent film device does not carry the interpretative weight it has when Sergio intentionally plays this instrumental on his reel-to-reel tape recorder, which is shot in close-up. To reverse the relationship, the tape recorder is merely a recording device when it plays back the song, while it is a weapon when Sergio surreptitiously used it to document what turned into a fight with Laura, which led to her decision to leave him.¹¹

That the viewers of *Inconsolable Memories* seem to enjoy some of the same dialectical privileges as the spectators of *Memories of Underdevelopment* does not mean that the two works instantiate the contradictions of the spectator-spectacle relationship in the same way. We have to wonder whether these machines not only represent socialism in discrepant ways, but also manufacture its image practices differently. Or is the difference between these two works that one is necessarily socialist and the other unavoidably capitalist?

Such realignment should make us readdress all the correspondences we have set-up between *Memories of Underdevelopment* and *Inconsolable Memories*, ending with the



One of four surveillance cameras used in *Suspiria*, 2003

question of choosing sides. Perhaps irony now resides within this slogan of democracy, “choice,” rather than “underdevelopment.” What is the variable repetition of permutation, other than a description of the capitalist economy of production and consumption? What is political choice now, after all, other than market determination? In 2005, and not 1980 or 1961–1962, this issue is not individual choice, but a question as to whether it is the destiny of one system to be absorbed into the other: inconsolable memories of underdevelopment?

We have to ask these difficult questions, given that the two recombinant narratives that precede *Inconsolable Memories*, *Journey into Fear* and *Suspiria*, model their operations on capital. They are capital machines: self-perpetuating systems whose movements are self-regulated by the self-valorizing capacity of value. As if commodities circulating in the market place, the equivalent elements that a narratological analysis formalize, also enter into differing configurations through performance. The continually varying configurations that produce the storylines are the results of differing value relations: permutation produces narrative value. Precisely because the products of narrative “meaning” in these works are value *relations*, we cannot separate narrative analysis from a permuting operation, as if the two were of content and form—the two function as one autonomous machine.

In *Journey into Fear*, narrative analysis parses dialogue into equivalent and interchangeable units, which are then linked by a computer operation according to a set of rules and joined to sequences of images. Permutation is only possible on the basis of the equivalency of elementary units. Narrative functions are quantified and formalized to the extent that the status of the author is put into doubt; a computer might, thus, become the narrative operator. *Suspiria* similarly performs an analysis of tale typology, using the Grimm Brothers’ *Fairy Tales* filtered through Marx’s *Das Kapital*; ever-new stories are the product of the combinational variations of a permutation group that take one hundred days to be exhausted. In both works, performances derived from “rules” link images and texts. In *Journey into Fear*, the dialogue continues to vary with 625 possible non-repeating combinations for 157 hours, while a fifteen-minute film loop reiterates a stock set of scenes; this discrepancy lends the film scenes their dubbed appearance. The staging of the visuals of *Suspiria* mimics the split NTSC signal; divided between luminance and chromalence signals and delivered from different sites, the image is a ghostly haunting of the medium. This haunting sustains its frequencies from the phantasmagoric appearance, as analyzed by Marx, of the haunted commodity that also comes to spook the value-free narrative functions and formal, non-economic exchanges of the fairy tale.

This essay is not the place to prove the speculation that Marx’s *Capital* is less a source for or reference of these projections than a working model for their machines. *Journey into Fear* and *Suspiria* create their fables from and model their operations on different historical periods of accumulation of capital. If *Journey into Fear* and *Suspiria* represent different periods of capital, does *Inconsolable Memories* determine its functionality from a specific

stage of socialism? Or is the functioning—and contradictions—of its machine determined by the conflicts between capitalism and socialism at a particular time, for example, Cuba around 1980? (This moment differs from the immediate post-colonial period of national liberation of Alea's film; the Iran-Contra scandal would sum up its contradictions and provide the socio-political context for Douglas' work.)¹²

Conflating Marxist and formal narratological analyses in these works reproduces purely functional roles for any individual subject. In structural systems of value, the subject is absent; a mere placeholder or functionary of the system, not an individuated actor. "The characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations," according to Marx, while in fairy tales, interchangeable character is determined by narrative function, not by individual identity.¹³ If subjects are constituted by exchange, in a permuting system of value such as Douglas' projections, no one is privileged—protagonist, spectator, author—when the legalistic guarantee of organic narrative, with its logical connections of space and chronological relations of time, is rendered void by the machine constitution of narrative effects, with its possibility of serial reproduction and reversals of temporalities, which are now quantifiably determined, not subjectively experienced. Does the continuation of permuting operations in *Inconsolable Memories* play a role analogous to the liquidation of the individual subject of *Memories of Underdevelopment*? Have all the alienating mechanisms of Douglas' projection served to question the lingering values of bourgeois ideology in 1980 Cuba? And is Douglas' viewer led by the end of *Inconsolable Memories* "to action upon oneself and then upon the reality in which one lives?"¹⁴ Following the critiques of capital of *Journey into Fear* and *Suspiria*, is *Inconsolable Memories*, already based on Alea's dialectical critique, a socialist critique in particular? Does capital still inhabit its socialist machine in order to be overcome?

System and subject mirror each other, so what is the outcome for Sergio in *Inconsolable Memories*? After all, he doesn't seem to have learned anything over his earlier doppelgänger, and is even more alienated, further displaced by his fugitive status. Moreover, he suffers the death that was written out of *Memories*' shooting script.¹⁵ However, as its spectators, we are just as subject to this system; have we been completely co-opted by the machine, not offered the gradual deviation from identification with Sergio's point of view that *Memories of Underdevelopment*'s spectators assumed? Yet, for all its permutations, perhaps this machine is constructed differently, or maybe it constitutes relations of capital otherwise.

While Douglas' capital machines are closed systems that perpetuate themselves, they also only operate by breaking down, although because of the smooth functioning of the apparatus, its continual cycles of variable repetitions, we do not necessarily notice this contradiction. Yet, these contradictory movements make the machine run and breakdown at the same time. Douglas' subtle critique only announces itself as this breakdown.

Inconsolable's machine's failure will not be that of Sergio, arrested because of the

breakdown of his encryption system. He communicated with his friend Pablo in Miami through the unique serial numbers of ripped-in-half banknotes. Encrypting, then decrypting is too formal a system of commutation (also in the sense here of conversion into money)—simple reversal rather than permutation. It has a limited redundancy, a fact that one of his cell-mates points out to him, to his chagrin: “If you keep on repeating the same serial number, isn’t it going to create an obvious pattern?” So similar to the closed system of *Inconsolable Memories*, nonetheless, Sergio’s “great crypto” doesn’t open to variation to the degree that the intermeshing loops facilitate. Sergio, thus, remains locked within the arresting logic of his crypto and the permuting structure of *Inconsolable Memories*, represented, on the one hand, by his imprisonment and, on the other, by his continuing displacement (spatially *and* temporally fugitive) when free. As we can recognize this predicament, we no longer share the same fate.

Perhaps one system has already broken down and *Inconsolable Memories* is the fabrication of a hybrid, repurposed machine, engineered through ingenuity from the resources freely available to the genius of a people—music, for instance. *Inconsolable Memories* adapts the structural virtuosity and contrapuntal variances of the musical form of the fugue to a projection apparatus that intertwines loops of sounds and images.

After all these years of embargo of Cuba by the United States, repurposing is not only ideological, as the substitution of a sign—Lenin Special School—in the past might have signalled real revolutionary social change, as well as being a political symbol. Repurposing defines daily practice and was already a frustrating factor for the characters of Alea’s film. Repurposing would be the inventive figure of the embargoed, embattled relationship between socialism and capitalism. *Inconsolable Memories* repurposes Alea’s film, reiterating it by instantiating its new socio-political context.

1 Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, "Memories of *Memories*," *Memories of Underdevelopment* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 200. Alea's text was first published in 1980.

2 Desnoes' *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment), published in Cuba in 1962, was translated by the author and published in English in 1967. Of the American and British printings, only Penguin in 1973 released the book under the title *Memories of Underdevelopment*.

3 Alea's *Memorias del subdesarrollo* premiered in Europe in 1968, but was not seen in the United States until 1973. The *Playboy* reference is from Juliane Burton, "Memories of Underdevelopment in the Land of Overdevelopment," *Memories of Underdevelopment*, 246.

4 Alea, "Memories of *Memories*," 208.

5 "In this way, the confrontation between the individual and society, between individual consciousness and the historical circumstances which one way or another condition it, takes place by means of two interweaving lines of development, two focal points of critique, two perspectives, two angles of vision: one reflecting the subjective viewpoint of the protagonist, the other, the 'objective' viewpoint of the film-makers as much toward the protagonist as toward the reality surrounding him, and surrounding us." *Ibid.*, 209.

6 The theme of repurposed buildings has been displaced to Douglas' photographic series that typically accompanies the film component. The theme, however, can be broadly interpreted as the ingenuity and inventiveness of repurposing that is displayed in many cultural, not just practical, forms—including linguistic use, for instance, the "New Vocabulary" episode of *Inconsolable Memories*, adapted from Desnoes' novel, concluding with Sergio wondering, "Was there another revolution no one told me about?"

7 Alea, "Memories of *Memories*," 207.

8 "From everything that we have said thus far, it emerges that it is precisely the spectator who is the target of the criticism unleashed by *Memories*—the

spectator who lives within the revolution, who is part of our revolutionary reality . . . And the very goal of the film is to question the survival of the values of bourgeois ideology in the midst of the revolution." *Ibid.*, 210.

9 A fugue state is characterized by loss of identity and flight from one's usual circumstances.

10 This strategy is prefigured in the titles of *Inconsolable Memories*, where for the last few seconds the three-part loop completes the title introduced by the segments from the five-part loop. Perhaps this is Douglas' nod to Sergio's irony in Alea's film, when reading a Castro quotation painted on a wall—"The people have said enough and are now on the move"—he completes the phrase with: "Like my parents, like Laura, and they won't stop until they get to Miami."

11 "Although the more or less 'documentary' images most appropriately express the objective world in which the protagonist is located, some of these images correspond to the character's own subjective world . . . This, of course, is the best proof of Sergio's false objectivity, which is not a matter of truly objective images. That is, we must not be misled by the documentary images in the film—obtained through the direct filming of reality . . . imagining them to constitute an objective reflection of the reality in which the fictional plot occurs. These images are selected and arranged by the film-makers and for that reason are marked by their subjectivity. They are just as tendentious as the other images in the film which have been carefully worked out before shooting begins." Alea, 208.

12 Note the intermixing of the Iran hostage crisis footage with that of the Mariel exodus in *Inconsolable Memories*. One of the two real-life Marxist intellectual participants on a panel discussion on "Literature and Underdevelopment" in Alea's film argues that "underdevelopment" is a language trap or linguistic alibi and that the contradiction of the time is between the productive forces of socialist revolution and the relations of production of capitalist imperialism. The other posits that contradiction is embodied in the state of war and, thus, political struggle would currently be located in Vietnam.